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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines situation-based learning as used within the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) program at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, and the processes of reflection and evaluation that accompany it, and discusses how issues identified by educators are incorporated as subjects into packages for students' study and investigation. The program's approach involves structuring the curriculum around teaching situations that need to be explained or managed and which, therefore, act as a stimulus for learning. Students propose ways to manage or resolve relevant issues, suggest courses of action, and reflect upon their own thinking and learning. One way in which data have been collected about the situations or dilemmas commonly confronting educators has been to meet with early childhood educators with a range of experience and who work in a variety of settings. From these meetings, several issues have been identified. Dilemmas related to working with children include dealing with tantrums, child biting, gender stereotyped play, and rough-and-tumble play. Issues related to working with families include communicating with parents of non-English speaking backgrounds, staff-parent conflict, and explaining accidents to parents. Dilemmas related to working with other staff include personality clashes, coping with stress, and staff turnover. Issues related to management and administration include fundraising, staff organization, parents not paying fees, and dealing with salespeople. Dilemmas like these are then used as the basis for packages of study to be undertaken by early childhood students. (Contains seven references.) (KDFB)

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IDENTIFYING DILEMMAS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, several subjects within the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) program at University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, have been taught using an approach entitled 'situation-based learning'. Using an action-research approach, attempts have been made to improve both the teaching of subjects such as child growth and development and health, safety and nutrition, as well as the understandings developed by students enrolled in these subjects.

One way in which data has been collected about the nature of situations or dilemmas that confront educators has been to meet with early childhood educators who have a range of experience and who work in a variety of settings to identify issues with which they have to deal on a regular basis. From these meetings, issues relating to working with children, families and other staff, as well as some management issues, have been identified. This paper will outline the continually evolving process of situation-based learning, and the processes of reflection and evaluation that accompany this; and will discuss how the issues identified by educators are incorporated into subjects as packages for study and investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The situation-based approach has been developed and implemented within the early childhood program over a number of years. Specifically, subjects relating to child growth and development; children's learning; play; and health, safety and nutrition have been taught using this approach. The approach adopted is based on a general definition of problem-based learning as 'an approach to structuring the curriculum which involves confronting students with problems from practice which provide a stimulus for learning' (Boud & Feletti, 1991:21). The situation-based approach differs from the problem-based approach in that the curriculum materials developed focus on situations that need to be explained or managed, rather than on problems to be solved. One of the aims of focussing on situations, rather than problems, has been to promote students' confidence and competence in their ability to respond to new or unfamiliar situations (Tegel & Dockett, 1994). A further aim in the adoption of this approach has been to promote students' critical and reflective thinking as they consider the situation presented, propose possible ways to manage or resolve relevant issues and then suggest appropriate courses of action. To conclude the process, students reflect upon their own thinking and learning as they worked through the process.

Students involved in the situation-based subjects are presented with a scenario or anecdotal description of an event. A range of support material accompanies this description. For example, a situation describing a child's refusal to eat lunch might be accompanied by a description of the setting, including the policy on meal times and nutrition, details of the child's eating habits over the preceding week, a copy of the child's enrolment form and some observations of the child along with a developmental summary and planning information. Students are then required to work through a series of steps in order to offer an explanation for the event, based on an overview of recent research and current practice in the area, and to offer some suggestions about an appropriate

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course of action that derives from this explanation. The actual process in which students engage has been detailed elsewhere (Dockett & Tegel, 1993; Tegel & Dockett, 1994).

One of the principles underlying the development and use of situations has been the need for these to be authentic. That is, for the situations to be perceived as realistic descriptions of events that occur within early childhood settings. In order to ensure that the situations developed remained authentic and that they were relevant and meaningful for students, staff teaching in the program undertook a range of consultations with early childhood educators from the south-western region of Sydney. The outcomes of these consultations have provided the information reported in this paper.

THE PROJECT

The action-research framework

The starting point for this project was a commitment to improving the nature and quality of teaching and learning within early childhood subjects that formed part of the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) program at UWS Macarthur. To this end, the essential features of an action-research framework – 'trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988:6) and working collaboratively with others in a process of critical reflection have been employed.

There have been three groups of collaborators involved in this project: staff teaching in the early childhood program; early childhood educators who are working in a variety of settings; and students who are enrolled in the subjects. This paper will report on the collaboration that has involved the first two of these groups in the development of relevant curriculum materials that are currently being trialed with the third group (the students).

An action-research framework was used, in that the steps on planning, acting and observing and then reflecting upon that action were employed (Figure 1). This first step in the action-research process involves staff within the early childhood program and the group of educators. The second major aspect of the process (Figure 2), which is currently being implemented, involves the students as well, who are in the process of completing the situations developed through the initial collaboration. It is planned to hold further workshops where the group of educators, University staff and students meet to reflect upon the packages and the ways in which they were used. The steps in the process are derived from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:11) and their description of the spiral of action research.

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Figure 1. Developing situations

Plan

- Invite educators to workshops about the approach.
- Establish the philosophy of the situation-based approach.
- Explore ways in which the group may collaborate in developing situations.
- Consider how situations can be made as authentic and relevant as possible.

Act and observe

- Small groups brainstorm possible situations/dilemmas from their own experience.
- Record potential situations.
- Identify areas or situations relevant to a range of early childhood settings.
- Devise situations from this information.
- Seek permission from educators to use 'real' resources, e.g., enrolment forms etc.

Reflect

- Reflect on assistance that could be available for students as they investigate possible situations. For example, would staff in centres feel comfortable discussing these issues? Why?
- Consider what issues would be raised and investigated in situations.
- Develop possible situations into packages for review by the group.

Figure 2. Using the situation-based learning packages

Plan

- Incorporate feedback and resources from educators.
- Introduce situations to students.

Act and observe

- Record students' reactions to and involvement in the process of situation-based learning as they work through the packages.
- Encourage students to make their own records of the process.
- Facilitate students' access to resources – human and material – as they work through the processes.

Reflect

- Use records kept by students and staff as the basis for discussion of the situation and the processes completed.
- Identify content areas covered by students, the explanations offered, resources used and the understandings reported by students.
- Consider comments made by students about their own learning. Discuss with them ways that this may be extended and supported in the future.
- Encourage students, educators and University staff to discuss ways in which the packages may be refined.

Identifying dilemmas

Twenty early childhood educators from a range of settings (covering the first years of school, preschool, long day care, children's resource centres, mobile services, occasional care as well as educators involved in the management of such services) were invited to a series of workshops where the background to the situation-based approach was discussed. Following this, the group was asked to consider situations that were relevant to their own experience.

Rather than identify specific problems, the group was asked to identify dilemmas or situations in which they were confronted with at least two possible explanations or courses of action and where some decisions had to be made about which of these alternatives was most appropriate (Katz, 1992). In researching how teachers manage dilemmas, Lampert (1985) notes that there are times when dilemmas may be resolved by choosing between alternatives. At other times, however, such a resolution is not possible and teachers are required to manage, rather than resolve, dilemmas. Deliberation among alternatives requires an awareness of those different alternatives and the ability to consider, evaluate and respond to the different demands of those alternatives. In other words, educators need to be able to explain situations from a number of different perspectives and to critically and reflectively evaluate those alternatives as they seek to manage conflicting demands (Dockett & Tegel, 1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the workshops, dilemmas were identified in four general areas: those related to working with children; working with families; working with other staff; and those which related to the management and administration of early childhood services. Examples of these dilemmas nominated by the group of educators included:

Dilemmas related to working with children:

- dealing with children who are aggressive towards other children, resulting in the possible injury of other children as well as parental complaints
- children swearing
- dealing with tantrums
- children biting and the need to explain this to parents
- approaches to discipline and children's reactions to these
- gender stereotyped or aggressive play initiated by children
- the emotional upheaval children feel at starting school/preschool
- conflicting demands of preschool and home environments for children
- children who 'collect' things from others
- rough-and-tumble play – is it play when children get hurt?
- children who don't seem to want to be involved – is it OK to 'do nothing' all day?

Dilemmas related to working with families:

- recognising and coping with the diversity of cultural backgrounds and expectations
- communicating with parents of non-English speaking backgrounds
- staff/parent conflict
- dealing with parent complaints
- concerns over parental requests to administer medication
- explaining accidents or incidents to parents
- reporting and coping with abused or neglected children

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- dealing with access and custody issues
- children who are not collected on time, and where parents cannot be contacted
- having to refuse a place to a child when fees have not been paid for a long time
- families accepting children with special needs into a mainstream setting
- incorporating parental expectations into programs, when staff do not consider these appropriate
- cloth vs disposable nappies
- parental expectations about discipline

Dilemmas related to working with other staff:

- motivating staff to attend in-services or to upgrade qualifications
- personality clashes among staff
- the enrolment of staff children in the service
- judging the performance of other staff
- coping with stress
- disagreements over handling a situation
- differences of opinion about what is developmentally appropriate
- differences between job classifications and pay scales among people who have similar roles and responsibilities
- staff making judgements about families and children
- misunderstandings and lack of communication
- staff turnover

Dilemmas related to management and administration

- flexibility of timetabling and hours of centre operation
- lack of funds, and the need to fundraise to supplement funded income
- reacting in emergency situations, such as those requiring first aid
- dealing with transitions during the day
- children's responses to relief staff
- organisation of staff
- vandalising of centre and playground areas
- parents not paying fees
- dealing with salespeople
- liaison between 0-5 services and schools
- feelings that there is no real support for new teachers/directors

In identifying these dilemmas, educators found that many other members of the group experienced similar situations. One of the positive features of the workshops was the collaboration that occurred between educators working in different settings or sectors. For example, educators working in the early years of school and those working in long day care reported that they experienced similar dilemmas in their interactions in each of the four areas. This realisation promoted a great deal of discussion between these groups and a growing awareness of, and respect for, the roles adopted within each setting.

When listing the dilemmas, it was of interest to note that dilemmas are confronted by educators in many instances throughout the day. Managing such dilemmas is, in fact, a major role of most educators. Dilemmas range from the somewhat tedious, such as dealing with salespeople, to those described as major, such as reporting suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. Whether or not the dilemmas were regarded as major, the group indicated that the analysis of a situation, consideration and evaluation of relevant perspectives and the development of a plan of action based on the available information was an essential part of working in the early childhood sector.

Several of the group indicated that they were surprised at the nature of the dilemmas listed, in that they were issues which had 'always seemed to be dilemmas'. In other words, despite the change in the number and types of early childhood services available, and the change in early childhood training programs, some issues seemed to persist as dilemmas. All participants in the group were keen to promote an approach which sought to assist educators in dealing with dilemmas, although they also recognised that such dilemmas were likely to remain in a profession that focused on dealing with people.

Potential situations

The group was also asked to expand on several of these dilemmas to propose the basis for situations that could be developed into a package for study to be undertaken by early childhood students. Several potential situations were developed, including the following:

> *Parents and staff have worked hard together to raise funds to re-develop the outdoor play environment. $20, 000 has been raised. Staff want to develop a long term plan that will involve various stages and will commence with levelling play areas, drainage, sprinkler systems and a new sandpit. Moveable outdoor equipment is planned. Parents have obtained a glossy brochure from a fixed outdoor equipment manufacturer that will use all of the money raised and will cater for only 10 children at any one time.*
>
> *A three-year-old stands in the playground, swearing loudly. Another child tells her that 'that's naughty'. Some other children join the first child, repeating words in a loud voice and laughing. Some parents entering the centre complain about the language being used.*
>
> *A new graduate is employed in a long day care centre and finds she is constantly tired and stressed. This staff member tends to get sick a lot, and relief staff are almost impossible to contact at short notice, which makes the management of the centre difficult for other staff. The staff member is easily upset over minor things, and finds that she has to walk away from stressful situations. Other staff find this difficult and respond in a range of different ways.*

As part of the package developed for each situation, students have access to the same type of information that would be available if the situation had occurred within the specified setting. Workshop participants identified the relevant materials and gave permission to use a variety of documentation that was used in such settings. For example, permission was granted to use the enrolment forms, observation formats, planning frameworks and service information booklets developed by specific services. In such instances, after the deletion of any identifying information, the forms are available to be completed to fit the particular situation.

From the discussion during the workshops, one of the potential issues was expanded and used as the basis for a situation-based learning package. The situation is included in the Appendix. This situation was discussed with the group of educators who attended a follow-up workshop and is soon to be trialed with a group of students. The group of educators who discussed this situation commented on the realism of the description and the issues that would be faced by those involved. Many related it to situations they had faced and, again, commonality was identified among those educators working in different settings. All expressed an eagerness to know how students would react to the situation and a keenness to have students discuss such situations with them when visiting services for field placements.

CONCLUSION

The collaboration between educators working in the early childhood field and University staff teaching in the early childhood area has been a positive feature of this project. Both groups have felt that their experience and expertise were being recognised and that their work was valued. It was also felt that students were likely to have a much more balanced view of working with young children when they were encouraged to consider both the theoretical and the practical aspects of situations. The educators also expressed an eagerness to work with students who were involved in the process of situation-based learning, feeling that they could contribute the understandings they had developed in a practical context in the knowledge that these would be valued by students as well as the staff facilitating the process of situation-based learning. This was in contrast to their beliefs about other types of assignments, where they felt that they may not have a sufficiently up-to-date theoretical knowledge to offer support and assistance.

As well as promoting collaboration among the early childhood field, the involvement of the group of educators in the development of curriculum materials has helped to improve and refine the teaching practice within a range of subjects. Since the adoption of the situation-based approach and the development of packages that reflect the reality of early childhood education, there has been a stronger focus on students having greater control over their own learning; on the development of the skills of critical and reflective thinking; and the matching of theoretical and practical knowledge. The refinement of this approach will continue as will the collaboration among the participants. During the remainder of this year, students will be have the opportunity to work through the situations identified by the group of educators and staff. Their involvement in this process and the reflection and evaluation of this will help to determine the future directions of the situation-based approach.

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APPENDIX

Planning the playground

You teach at the local public school. This year, you are teaching Kindergarten and have spent lots of time meeting parents and family members of children in your class. The school has a very active parents group and a number of parents of children in your class regularly attend meetings and lobby for important issues and activities.

On Monday morning, you arrive early to prepare the equipment for the week's science interest centres. You are surprised to find a large number of parents and children in the playground discussing something as they walk around, seeming to pace something out in different parts of the playground. You wave and call out, "Hello".

Most of the parents and children return the greeting but continue what they are doing. Alexis, one of the children in your class, waves back and calls out, "Hi, Mrs Jackson. We are getting new climbing things to play on. They are really high and really special. We're really lucky. Our parents did get the money so we can have dese things."

You nod and keep walking, calling out, "Oh, sounds interesting. I'll have to find out all about it." You begin setting up the interest centres in the classroom when Marge, the other Kinder teacher, walks in.

"Hi, Daph, have a good weekend?" You only have time to nod when Marge continues, "Listen, you won't believe what's going on. Some parents are really keen for the money raised in the bike-a-thon to be spent on some new outdoor equipment. Apparently they have pretty much bought it. But I've seen the diagrams and it's really not all that safe. It's very high and parts of it have no railing. I'm worried, too, that the surface underneath may not be suitable. I know that it will have to be approved by the principal and by the parents group, but these parents seem very sure it will go ahead. I don't know what's going to happen."

You both go to the parents and ask about the type of equipment, saying you'd like to have a look at the design. They don't have one, but one of the mothers draws a diagram in some dirt. The equipment is apparently made of steel and its highest point in 1.25 metres from the ground. It is curved in shape and appears to be basically a monkey bar type of frame. There is a ladder at the front to climb onto it. Underneath will be sand.

The parents indicate that they still have to go through the last of the red tape, which includes seeing the parents' group and the principal, but they suggest that this is only a formality. They add that if the equipment is opposed they will be rather upset and will make a lot of noise about it. One mother suggests, "It's our money – we raised it. And they're our kids, so we should be able to choose what it's spent on. The library has enough books and encyclopaedias. We decided that they need something which was really going to be used by everyone."

You and Marge walk back to the staffroom and decide that you had better go and talk to the principal, Heidi, because you are worried – not only about the equipment, but also about the manner of the parents. Heidi agrees that there are some important issues and arranges to meet with the parents group to discuss these. She indicates that, as soon as there are some accurate details available, staff and parents will meet to discuss them.

AUTHORS

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